Forging Female Subjectivity on the Commercial Stage in the 1920s and '30s: Three Plays by María Luisa Ocampo, Concepción Sada, and Alfonsina Storni

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In recent years and without garnering the attention she rightly deserves, Olga Martha Peña Doria has made significant contributions to the field of Mexican theatre studies by tracing the activities of female dramatists in the first half of the 20th century. Peña Doria has undertaken the monumental task of tracking down manuscripts and rare print copies of plays and reviews, transcribing many of them, interviewing figures of the theatre world, and thereby calling attention to writers such as Catalina D'Erzell, María Luisa Ocampo, Concepción Sada, Magdalena Mondragón, and Amalia de Castillo Ledón, all of whom are virtually forgotten in Mexico and unheard of beyond its borders.[1] This article follows the lead of Peña Doria in an attempt to look more closely at examples of the work of Sada (1899-1981) and Ocampo (1899-1974), both Mexican playwrights active in the realist theatre scene of the 1920s and '30s whose works highlight and situate the artificial and hypocritical nature of socially constructed gender roles as a locus of conflict. In addition to bringing needed attention to these dramatic works, it inscribes the literary efforts of the playwrights and their positions in the forging of female subjectivity within the wider scope of Mexico's myriad forms of conceiving the "modern" and "Modernity."[2] A much better known example of commercial and realist drama from Argentina, Alfonsina Storni's *El amo del mundo* (1927; originally titled *Dos mujeres*), serves as an instructive point of comparison that flushes out the nuances of the social critique found in Sada's *El tercer personaje* (performed 1936) and Ocampo's *Cosas de la vida* (1923).[3]

There are, of course, several reasons why Mexican plays written by women in the '20s and '30s, whether performed and printed or not, have passed under

the radar virtually undetected. At the time in which these plays were written and performed, the country had just emerged from a social revolution that brought about fundamental changes in the areas of education, culture, and the arts. For the institutionalized revolutionary government, Mexican literature of the time, like the endeavors of the popular muralists, was meant to galvanize a social project intent on promoting the positive outcomes of the Revolution. In fact, the literary community was divided among those who supported the impetus and ideology of the national project and those, like the group of poets and playwrights known as *los contemporáneos*, who eschewed it, preferring a more intimate and experimental literary venture that followed the lead of the European avant-garde. In terms of women's issues, while there did emerge a national version of the "New Woman" and women did begin to enter the workforce, albeit slowly, suffrage movements were squashed or disregarded entirely and the literary community was on the whole disinterested in female writers. It is therefore not surprising that Mexican female dramatists' productions from the period are virtually unknown.

By the same token, however, the fact that plays concerned with socially-constructed gender roles, female subjectivity, and non-traditional views on marriage and motherhood were produced in Mexico City in the '20s and '30s needs to be addressed. These plays provide a more complete sense of the participation of female writers —playwrights in this case— in the forging of female subjectivity both in the larger context of Spanish America's Modernity and, more specifically, in Mexico's fashioning of a modern national identity. Writing in 1959, Rosario Castellanos scorned the aesthetic merit of plays written by women in the first decades of the century, yet conceded that they revealed the dismal state of female autonomy in Mexico: "[E]stas obras no son consideradas estéticamente sino sólo como el síntoma de un modo general de vivir y de actuar en nuestro país" (112). Given that Castellanos does not explain her dismissal of these plays, one has to assume that she had —not entirely fairly— written them off due to their formulaic reproduction of the modes of melodrama.

Written for the commercial theatre and clearly realist as opposed to the more visible avant-garde and experimental movements in force at the same time, all three plays considered in this article posit female protagonists embroiled in entanglements of love relationships, marriage, and motherhood. Their decisions regarding marriage and maternity reveal a changing tide in the way female artists conceived of traditional gender roles, the possibilities granted by the theatre to "act out" these clearly artificial roles, and the

enormous obstacles faced both by the female playwrights and their female protagonists in challenging the status quo. In studying the female characters' complex relationships with the institution of marriage and its primary consequence, childbearing, I am concerned with the participation —or lack thereof— of women in the forging of their own subjectivity, itself an imperative of Modernity.

In these plays by Ocampo, Sada, and Storni, the female characters read, act on, and construct the identities of those around them and try to do the same for themselves. It becomes clear that their social surroundings spurn them if they do not conform to established gender roles and behaviors. It is not in vain, however, that the protagonists read, act on, and construct identities, given that the creative transformation of an individual and his or her surroundings can be understood as a means of defining the modern subject. Alicia Salomone, following Octavio Paz in *Los hijos del limo* (1974), has described such a subject as "ese ser que echando mano de la autonomía que le provee la razón, una condición que en teoría lo hermana con todos los miembros de la especie, es capaz de operar reflexivamente sobre el mundo y sobre sí mismo, transformando creativamente su entorno y su propia persona" (106-7).

While in theory Salomone's idea should apply to all human beings, Mexican and Argentine women of the 20's and 30's were not assumed to be included in the abstract concept of *subject*. In Storni's words, "las mujeres […] se encontraban fuera del pacto republicano, en función de las múltiples 'incapacidades' (jurídicas, económicas, sociales, políticas y culturales) a que estaban sometidas, bajo el imperio de un prejuicio 'no digno de la América libre'" (qtd. in Salomone 219).[4] As Mary Louise Pratt has suggested, women were among those "others" not alien or without, but rather included *within* the project of Modernity, which depended on their subjugation. In classical liberal theory, liberty implies an individual's freedom to develop one's potential and pursue one's desires and interests. This view, however, was only viable if there was another sector of the population that would take on the charge of reproduction and childrearing. In other words, freedom depended *a priori* on this clearly *not* free sector of the population (Pratt 55, my emphasis). The prejudice identified by Storni thus constituted a systematic exclusion that allowed men to freely define themselves and set the standards for the identity of the modern subject according to their own terms.

The theoretical exclusion of women from the conception of the subject in Modernity does not mean that in practice women did not struggle to achieve what Salomone understands as the right to "transforma[r] creativamente su

entorno y su propia persona." As Pratt has argued, self-determination was not a given for women, but rather had to be won. Modernity is not an agent that grants freedom, but rather an agent that sets certain conflicts into motion and is, at the same time, made up of those conflicts (Pratt 49). Both the female playwrights and the characters studied here attest to the fact that the stage was a place in which this particular conflict was borne out. The performative nature of the theatre is especially significant for tracking, recording, and marking social changes. Realist theatre in particular replicated social scenarios that were being created and discussed in the private and public realms beyond the theatre, including the entry of women into the workforce, ideas on the "New Woman," and changing social dynamics regarding men, women, and the family.

By examining the roles played within the larger "game" of patriarchy, it becomes patently clear that both the theatre and the patriarchy have their respective winners and losers. Plays by Latin American female dramatists, therefore, transformed the theatre into the arena in which performances of gender were staged, well before theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler construed their influential theories.[5] The performances of female characters were dual in their intent and message. On the one hand, they served to critique, question, or uphold commonly held beliefs about women, matrimony, and motherhood and, on the other, they sought to understand why carving out a space for themselves as women and mothers on their own terms was so fraught with difficulties.

As will become clear, the female protagonists of *El tercer personaje*, *Cosas de la vida*, and *El amo del mundo* all fail at constituting their respective conceptions of self as mothers. While their failures can be read as potential warnings to women regarding the breaking of social and cultural norms, they can also be understood just as easily, and probably more likely, as a social critique of the lack of freedom for women who attempted to define themselves as autonomous subjects. Castellanos's reading of these and similar plays is far less generous. For her, the prescriptive endings that result from the protagonists' failures serve as evidence that, far from exemplifying Mexican women's greater access to education and mobility, "se deduce […] que a la mujer hay que educarla no para que sea independiente sino para que por propia convicción defienda, hasta el sacrificio, los principios patriarcales" (106).

To properly value the contributions of writers like Ocampo, Sada, and Storni, we must contextualize them in terms of their critical reception and the social milieu in which their works were written and performed. This

involves confronting the long-standing view according to which only those literary works that purported to be new or renewed were "avant-garde." It also means questioning, as scholars have done more recently, the assumption that female writers did not participate in the Latin American vanguard movements of the '20s and '30s. With regard to female writers in Chile and Argentina during this period, Osmar Sánchez Aguilera, for example, argues that "la gradual incorporación de las experiencias de vida y correspondientes perspectivas de ellas a la literatura iría dando paso a un lenguaje nuevo, acorde con la novedad de tales experiencias; y, en conjunto, todo ello terminaría por afectar la noción misma de literatura, aunque ello no fuera perceptible siempre en lo inmediato" (12). Similarly, Salomone and Beatriz Sarlo have looked at how the "moderate" and "proper" ("*bienpensante*") avant-garde of the River Plate was interested in ruptures on an aesthetic level but was much less concerned with the equally radical questioning of institutions and ideological discourses in Argentina, such as that found in Storni's writing (Sarlo 248, 250; Salomone 60).

When we add to this oversight the usual categorical exclusion of commercial theatre —believed to simply reproduce normative cultural models—, it becomes evident that we need to place these plays on the cultural map as spaces of mediation or dispute in a public setting. Undoubtedly, these spaces were made possible due to the fact that in both countries it was a transitional historical moment that encouraged increasing openness in terms of the inclusion and participation in education, employment, and professionalization of different sectors of the population, including women. Corresponding with these social changes, in Mexico at least, was the theatre's gradual evolution from traditional Spanish models and forms to an increasingly nationalist theatre on the one hand and, on the other, one that was decidedly experimental.

Notably, female playwrights, perhaps because of their marginalized status in the theatre world, moved quite freely among these purportedly antagonistic categories. Storni wrote two avant-garde plays: *Dos farsas pirotécnicas*: *Cimbelina en 1900 y pico...* and *Polixena y la cocinerita*, which she published in 1931 (Salgado 21). Sada and Ocampo did not write plays of this nature, but they were not impervious to them, or to their colleagues who wrote and produced more experimental works. In fact, as Guillermo Schmidhuber de la Mora notes, virtually no one has called attention to the fact that the supposedly incompatible "national" group La Comedia Mexicana, to which Sada and Ocampo belonged, and the more "experimental" Grupo de los Siete Autores (also known as Los Pirandellos) in fact collaborated closely between 1925 and 1937.[6]

As should be increasingly evident, female playwrights must be studied both in theatrical terms and within the larger context of emerging Modernity, in which artistic transformations have be considered alongside cultural, political, and economic change. The first decades of the 20th century saw the advent of the *mujer moderna*, or *nueva mujer*, whose appearance coincided with emerging nationalisms, politics of the masses, and nascent feminism. This new or modern woman undoubtedly had greater mobility and access to education and certain labor sectors, as well as the opportunity to consume modern products, the incipient media culture, and leisure activities, but no political rights (Pratt 55). In a similarly contradictory vein, middle- and upper-class feminists lobbied for civil rights, while simultaneously imagining "a useful woman citizen as the guardian of national family values through the concept of social motherhood" (Unruh 2).[7] Culturally, socially, and politically defined, motherhood was understood not only as a divine responsibility for women, in the sense of carrying out God's will, but also as central in women's responsibilities, as they were tasked with educating the country's future citizens, a belief which had carried over from the 19th century. As Vicky Unruh has shown, only at times did the rhetoric of cultural Modernity and political feminism coincide in the political discourse of the period (1); for the most part, Latin American women were bombarded with contradictory messages.

Engaging with, presenting, and problematizing these mixed messages was a concern for the female playwrights I am looking at, and thus they should be understood as agents who, through their plays, participated in a larger cultural conversation.[8] Conversations, it must be said, are not a coherent system, but rather, as Robert Hymes suggests, a repertory, a "lumpy and varied historical accumulation of models, systems, rules and other symbolic *resources*, differing and unevenly distributed, upon which people draw and through which they negotiate life with one another" (qtd. in Unruh 6). As Salomone and Unruh have shown, female writers and artists of this period should not be considered subjects in which culture inexplicably manifests itself, but rather as cultural agents constantly at work making and remaking culture. As such, their work not only allows us to study the tension between the collective imaginary and socio-cultural practices, but is also itself a manifestation of culture (Tuñón 190) that divulges perspectives on the modern subject and the artistic avant-garde of the first two decades of the 20th century.

The discourses produced by and about women in the '20s were a minefield of tensions insofar as they responded to impulses of continuity *and* rupture. Modernity for the "New Woman," in the words of Rita Felski, provided

> bold imagining of an alternative future, but the 'modern' also often embodied 'crisis.' The prostitute, the actress, the mechanical women, the nostalgia-ridden prehistoric woman, and the voracious modern consumer woman, all manifested art's ambivalent response to capitalism, technology, and social change. (14)

Women's writing of the time is thus one of the sites in which the crisis of Modernity is borne out and is, as Pratt argues, itself a site of conflict or crisis.[9] It is not unusual to find in Mexican female playwrights' work from the time a combination of ideas and customs from the late 19th century, dominant ideas of the 1920s, and more radical, modern ideas. In terms of forging an identity for women in the plays by Sada, Ocampo, and Storni, crisis occurs precisely when the characters make demands on a traditional society whose purported propriety veils hypocrisy. Bearing the harshest brunt of the criticism in these plays are not the individual characters, but rather the questionable moral character of society and the limited and limiting social and political milieu that denies the female protagonist the opportunity to define herself according to her own terms.

It would be foolish to present the experiences and condition of women in Argentina and Mexico at the time as identical. For one, suffragists in Argentina had made significant headway in the 1920's, a time in which Mexico was still reeling from the destruction wrought by the Revolution. Notwithstanding these differences, we can see similarities in the attempt to use commercial theatre as a way to address gender roles as a social and public concern of importance to all sectors of the population. A widely used strategy in this sense was to play off different kinds of female characters. All three plays, for instance, portray a version or two of *la nueva mujer*, whether as intellectual, professional or scheming women, who participate in the choosing of their husbands or male companions and attempt also to wield the power of decision over their maternity. Significantly, women are understood and portrayed in these plays by means of their relationships to and interactions with men, particularly through marriage, and those sustained with other women in female friendships. The similarities among the works regarding their awareness of the artificial and performative nature of gender roles and the significance of maternity in the construction of a female gendered identity encourages us to think more closely about the role of the theatre in the formulation of a modern aesthetic and subject. It is precisely in the venue of the theatre that the contradictory messages given to women in the '20s and '30s —clearly a conflict and incongruence of Modernity itself, as I have aimed to show— are performed and questioned.

In a piece written for the *La Nota* in 1919 and titled "Compra de maridos," the ever-astute Alfonsina Storni describes Modernity as a flux of merchandise in which men, women, and discourses are understood as commodities. Concepción Sada's protagonist in *El tercer personaje* takes Storni's analogy at face value when she places an advertisement in the newspaper to acquire a husband. As an independent, unmarried, thirty-something pediatrician, and Mexico's first professional woman represented on stage (Peña 34-5), Adriana is forced to seek out this recourse given that she desperately wants a child but clearly does not fit the bill for marriage, having eschewed that option when she chose to become a professional.[10]

At the outset of the play, we are privy to a conversation between Adriana and an American researcher, one of three suitors to answer her advertisement:

> MR. SHEPRERS [sic]: Yo tener catalogadas 164 [mujeres] y querer una mujer como usted, por eso estoy dispuesto a casarme. Yo solamente quiere poder estudiar a usted, y si usted gusta puede estudiar a mí. Yo tener un magnífico proyecto y un muy buen sistema.
>
> ADRIANA: No es lo que busco. Siento no poder ser la número 165 de su catálogo—pero deseo otra cosa. Yo no podría prestarme como materia para un experimento, puesto que trato de hacer otro a mi vez. (Sada 20)

There are several noteworthy aspects about this encounter. For one, Adriana's nature as a decided and self-assured woman interested in acquiring a husband with her money is understood as freakish and she worthy of cataloguing as an unheard of specimen; she is, in Sheprers' words: "un poco extraña mujer… rara…rara…Usted sabe lo que quiere" (Sada 20). His assumptions about her, even as a foreigner, reveal the well-known social expectations associated with the affective nature of the female stereotype summed up in the popular Mexican expression, "Gran cerebro…pequeño corazón." Adriana is an unlikely candidate for marriage; as a professional and intelligent woman, she poses a threat to her suitors and, worse yet, she is unwilling to feign ignorance and intellectual subservience. Sheprers understands that Adriana will not be able to marry within her expected social group and thus a scientific marriage experiment, such as the one he offers, is probably her best option.

Secondly, one must remark on the fact that both characters use pseudo-scientific language to speak of a marriage contract, the same language that has at its core the polarization of gender roles according to modern sexual ideologies. Instead of the highly charged language of sexual courtship that would pose him as subject and her as object of desire, Adriana and Sheprers

both speak of "experiments," "projects," "systems" and "catalogues." Their exchange has them speaking as equals, with language that was clearly understood as masculine at the time. Notably, Adriana mimics Sheprers' language in order to speak of her own project or desire, which ultimately is not so much about purchasing a husband as it is about having a child. Adriana's calculations are clearly ensconced in the mores of her time, evident in her eschewing the possibility of stigmatizing her child "con un sello tan vil" (14) by conceiving out of wedlock.

There are issues to take up with Sada's *El tercer personaje*. It is at times too melodramatic, there are too many characters and subplots, and, most notably, the presence of the omniscient and enigmatic Third Character of the title, who acts as a kind of fate or destiny and decides the outcome of Adriana's life and of the play, is problematic.[11] In choosing a husband, Adriana settles on Alfredo, whose purely monetary intentions for accepting her offer seem genuine. Predictably, their mutual contempt for one another grows as the two role-play a false marriage. As the likelihood of having a child slips away from her, Adriana realizes her mistake yet insists on keeping up appearances to protect her reputation. Eventually, the Third Character mocks Adriana's and Alfredo's naive belief that they control their lives by showing them how foolish they have been and dooms them to fall in love and have a child.

While the Third Character clearly posits the play in line with traditional thinking about gender roles, his intervention is particularly disconcerting given that he destroys any attempt on Adriana's part to decide her own fate. That said, before he ties everything up neatly at the end of the play, Adriana's apparently contradictory behavior —she wants a child but not a husband, she's cold to men and yet a maternal pediatrician, she wants to maintain her profession *and* have a child— probably reverberated with her audience in the 1930s, much as they would today in Mexico. While the conclusion of the play seems to suggest that the "New Woman" must comply with social norms regarding marriage and motherhood, Sada stages marriage as a farce desperately clung to in an equally false society that values appearances above all else.

Storni's *El amo del mundo* is a realist, three-act thesis or problem play that denounces an essentially *machista* society. While not employed like Adriana, Márgara, the protagonist of Storni's play, is clearly bourgeois and hence economically independent. She, too, has lost both parents, is in her thirties, and remains an unlikely candidate for marriage. Unlike Zarcillo, her rival for the affection of Claudio —the "amo del mundo" alluded to in the title—, she is unwilling to feign ignorance and vapidity and play at being

sexually innocent, as is expected of her. As opposites, Márgara and Zarcillo dramatically play out the drama's thesis. Márgara has a "*[m]irada penetrante, inteligente, de ser hecha al ejercicio de la lectura y a la observación de la vida desde puntos de vistas superiores*. […] *Ella es, en el conflicto, la mujer que escapa a su ambiente y lo supera*," while Zarcillo is "*toda imaginación, cálculo, mimo y astucia.* […] *esconde, queridamente, una inteligencia poco común puesto al servicio de sus intereses femeninos. Ella es, en el conflicto, la mujer que penetra su ambiente, se amolda a él y lo usufructúa. Finge una debilidad que no posee y la usa para domar a los que son más fuertes que ella*" (Storni 1119). While both Adriana and Márgara are deemed unlikely brides, unwilling to play according to the rules of the game set by the "amo del mundo," it is important to note that as a social contract, marriage is not particularly attractive to them as they already possess that with which it would endow them: social status and economic wellbeing.

Despite her intelligence and self-assurance, however, there is one area in which Márgara does enter into the web of deception and lies that are constantly being spun around her. In order to protect her son, Carlitos, from the stigma of being born out of wedlock, she hides the truth until she confesses it to Claudio, who abandons any notion of pursuing her, not because she has broken the normative moral codes regarding premarital sexual relations, but because she refuses to continue to dissimulate, to hide the truth. Zarcillo, the frivolous "New Woman," becomes Claudio's wife, we are to understand, for her unmatched ability to feign and perform her normative gender role. Zarcillo fulfills Claudio's expectations just as Storni describes them in the initial stage directions: "[Claudio] *se cree un poco amo del mundo. La mujer puede ser, a su lado, el capricho, la distracción y hasta la locura. Pero nunca el otro ser de igual limpieza moral*" (1119). For him, a woman "[n]o puede ser libre, sino separándose del amor, porque ella filosofa, pero la naturaleza la carga con el hijo" (1179). In other words, Claudio believes precisely in the essentialist notion that Storni wishes to prove false; for her, being a woman is not necessarily tantamount to being a wife and a mother.

Another suggestive similarity between Márgara and Adriana is their shared ability, as good readers, to detect the performances of gender roles. Both protagonists use the terms "literatura" and "comedia" as both metatheatrical references and a means of questioning the construction of a female subject in a male-dominated world. It seems clear that both playwrights and protagonists understand gender roles as artificial, yet are also aware of the dangers implied in revealing the falsity of these social constructions. In *El*

tercer personaje, for example, a friend reproaches Adriana, remarking, "[v]eo que estás tomando la *comedia* demasiado en serio, tú, tan juiciosa siempre…" (Sada 28; my emphasis). Similarly, in the third act, Adriana admits that "ahora todo me es indiferente. La mujer vana, ociosa, adinerada y frívola, está arrepentida de su experimento, de la absurda *novela* que trató de vivir, y aquí, en este mismo instante, le pone *el último renglón*" (Sada 71; my emphasis). Márgara, meanwhile, refuses to act as a "comediante" of femininity, saying, "[n]o quiero hacer la menor comedia ante el hombre destinado a amarme" (Storni 1178). Moreover, she understands that Claudio's sexist discourse is a fiction and uses the truth to dismantle it:

> MÁRGARA: ([a Claudio] *con maldad, porque conociéndole y sabiendo de antemano que va a ser rechazada, prefiere causar repulsión a provocar lástima*.) Literatura. Mire, en dos palabras voy a echar abajo el andamiaje de su imaginación, le voy a revelar lo que hay en usted mismo; […] Y allí van: Carlitos es hijo mío. (Storni 1150)

In both plays, being good readers of books and of their respective societies renders the protagonists unfit for marriage. In Storni's words, in the eyes of their communities such women are "Eva[s] punible[s]" "en la[s] que confluyen dos características: el intelectualismo y el inevitable conflicto con el medio" (qtd. in Salomone 257). Claudio's rejection of Márgara is unwavering and proves Storni's point: "[…] [C]uando una mujer razona con la libertad con que usted lo hace, no se la siente ya mujer… Se ve al camarada" (1179). For her part, Adriana is described by her friends as a "tratado de medicina empastado en carne" (Sada 64). The leads in these plays contrast, as Salomone and Masiello have shown, with poor readers, those who are naïve, lack critical-thinking skills, and consume popular literature, much as Zarcillo does. Mélida from *El tercer personaje* seems to be similarly described as "una chiquilla romántica, impresionable" (Sada 71).

In the case of both Sada's and Storni's female protagonists, the choice to become mothers, to control their reproduction, clearly seems to be a decision that would be made by a modern subject in defining the self and the course of one's own life. Nonetheless, maternity is presented as an alternative love relationship to that of marriage, which may be reflective of patriarchy's insistence that women need to love and feel loved in order to be happy.[12] Adriana speaks of being incomplete without a child, saying that "mi carrera, en verdad, no bastaba a llenar el vacío de mi vida […] quería un hijo" (Sada 74), while Márgara is motherly to both Zarcillo and Carlitos. Both plays end in an exaltation of the sense of plenitude due to newfound maternity (Adriana) or the

acceptance of a previously repressed maternity (Márgara). Unlike Claudio, Carlitos loves Márgara for the right reasons and once the truth is revealed, she need not act but authentically.[13] Although their motivation in wanting or needing to be loved may well be conciliatory, for better or worse, Adriana's and Márgara's maternity seems autonomously motivated and sustained as opposed to being driven by a divine intention, animal instinct, or the institutions of marriage and the Church.

Both Adriana and Márgara are forced to walk the uneasy line between social legitimacy and their autonomous decisions. It seems undeniable that there is no happy medium in this case, given that clearly the "amo del mundo" and the "tercer personaje" ensure that the women and the plays give in to reigning social mores, including the notions that women are "naturally" maternal or are ennobled by motherhood. Yet the implicit lesson —that these female characters are demanding a hand in the game, such that the larger social order might allow them to truly define and construct their own identities— is not lost. In this way, then, *El amo del mundo* and *El tercer personaje* present us with audacious proposals about the construction and nature of female subjectivity. They simultaneously uphold, disrupt, and criticize the reigning discourse on women, marriage, and maternity. This contradiction points to how these plays can be understood as loci in which the modern crisis of sexual and gender identities is borne out and are themselves a site of conflict or crisis, as Pratt and Felski argue. Before being squashed by the fateful (fatal?) "tercer personaje," Adriana declares that "[m]i vida es mía, de nadie espera ni a nadie debe nada. ¿No puedo hacer de ella lo que me plazca?" (Sada 28). Márgara, meanwhile, explains to Claudio in no uncertain terms that "[n]o he sido una chiquilina engañada; he obrado por elección, por decisión, por voluntad, como un ser libre" (Storni 1151). Márgara, moreover, perceives her freedom in terms of equality:

> Yo soy mucho más que una mujer; soy un ser humano. Y frente a usted [Claudio], porque no lo necesito, soy un ser libre. ¿Y sabe de dónde me llega mi libertad? De no sentirme íntimamente ofendida por un acto de amor. Lo miro de igual a igual. Lo hablo de igual a igual. Lo juzgo de igual a igual. (1177)

These messages did not and could not have gone unperceived by the theater-going public of the time. In fact, the scandal surrounding Storni's play, which resulted in its being pulled from the theater after only three days, provides invaluable proof of this. Despite apparent success among theatergoers, *El amo del mundo*'s run was cut short by the powers that be, who claimed to

resent the supposed anti-masculine tones of the play. A more likely explanation seems that under attack was Storni's audacity in portraying an unwed mother on stage when it was well-known that she was one herself.[14]

In 1923, five years before the short run of *El amo del mundo*, theatergoers in Mexico City were also privy to a play about a single, unwed mother. In July of that year, the Teatro Virginia Fábregas was the venue for the premiere of María Luisa Ocampo's *Cosas de la vida*.[15] Ocampo's play, written only two months earlier, tackles the hypocritical role playing, or what fifteen years later Usigli called the "gesticulation" of Mexican society that followed the Revolution. *Cosas de la vida* is also a commentary on a moment of political and social transition in which women's lives were changing, as was their involvement or autonomy in terms of defining their subjectivity. In addition, men and women's relationships were shifting, consumerism was on the rise, and the traditional social status of the *hacendado*, or landowner, was being challenged by the more "modern" alternatives of the businessman or politician.

In this play, the morally upstanding Luisa, an excellent teacher and outstanding mother, is a far better promise for modernizing Mexico than those who disparage her for having had a child out of wedlock. After all, she is left to fend for herself not out of choice but because Rafael breaks his promise of marriage despite the fact that they agreed to consummate their relationship. Rafael's abandonment of Luisa has an ulterior motive beyond submitting to his mother's wish that he not marry "una perdida"; he wishes to enter the world of politics, an act that depends on his mother's consent. An *hacendado* indifferent to his laborers, who are organizing in unions in the post-revolutionary period, Rafael is, to use Ocampo's words, "[u]n hombre de bien, indudablemente, que, entre otras cosas no sirve para nada." Clearly, the political future of the country did not bode well in such hands. But Rafael, who describes himself as a "fantoche," or puppet, is also the natural result of his upbringing by Doña Fe, a woman who "[c]onocía la vida en teoría, nada más, y su moral se reducía también a teorías." Despite her supposed Christian values (underscored in her name), Doña Fe is not compassionate, but rather controlling and duplicitous, even though she, like Luisa, was abandoned by the father of her children. [16]

Like Adriana and Márgara, Luisa shows signs of being a woman who understands her self and her world in a new and different way. Despite economic hardships and the scorn of her community, Luisa doesn't ultimately reproach anyone but herself: "Después de todo, no me arrepiento de haber amado [a Rafael], lo que me reprocho es haber creído que todo terminaba

si él me dejaba." Ocampo represents single motherhood as a result of social change. It is not ideal, because it brings much hardship, yet *Cosas de la vida*, by its very title, suggests that these things do happen, that women are left to their own devices, leaving the reader and audience to question, as does the dramatist, whether the social structure will be able to afford these women any alternatives to marriage. A career in teaching and the advent of childcare for working women offer Luisa the possibility to lead a life of her own and to raise her son in the best way possible. The truth remains, however, that the morally questionable Rafael can reinvent himself as a politician, yet as a woman, Luisa struggles to live on her own terms, to transform herself and her surroundings as a man might. As Luisa tells Rafael, when he attempts to right his wrongdoing, "Para ti fue un pecado de juventud, una simple aventura; para mí fue otro pecado juvenil, sin más consecuencias que un nuevo ser a costo de mi honor." Like Márgara in *El amo del mundo*, Luisa shuns her eventual suitors as she can provide for her son on her own and his love for her proves sufficient to fulfill her needs: "[e]l amor de mi hijo me ha compensado."

Luisa, like Mexico, is living a time of change and is caught between two worlds: the irrevocable, conventional past of the Porfiriato and a more emancipated future that burgeons (thanks to the Revolution), but remains elusive. In some ways, the theatre scene revealed this same vicissitude, as avant-garde plays were performed alongside more traditional forms of theatre. Nonetheless, the realist and commercial theatre was better suited for presenting a socio-political critique of the institutions of marriage and motherhood, while at the same time questioning the national artistic agenda. Realist theatre proved the ideal venue for underlining the artificial nature of social relations and the performances of gender identities, in which men and women play at being men and women, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, roles that were not, and could not be, unchanging. Motherhood, as Bowers has shown, "far from a static 'natural' experience, is a moving plurality of potential behaviors always undergoing supervision, revision, and contest" (19). Storni, for one, understood this all too well; for her, maternity was a praxis marked by heterogeneous experiences that varied according to class and social power (Sierra 98).

It is with that lens in mind, then, that we must sort through the contradictions presented in these and other plays written by women. This is the case of *Cosas de la vida*, which lobbies for more just conditions for single, working women who further themselves intellectually and professionally, but also expounds their competence at childrearing as their principle value. Indeed,

Cosas de la vida, *El tercer personaje*, and *El amo del mundo* present us with new, less hypocritical forms of interaction between men and women, yet the female characters are all trapped in a society that balks at the New Woman and struggles with contradictory messages. The fact remains, however, that motherhood outside of wedlock or motherhood in a feigned marriage contract were at once problematic as social realities and contemplated as options —and not necessarily negative ones— by women themselves, particularly educated women who could do without marriage. The conclusion seems to be, then, that well-educated women, good readers, can play at choosing the course of their lives but with their hands tied. Their attempts at playing their own card are ultimately impeded when their life choices threaten the social status quo. Individual subjectivity for women is thus limited by the fact that gender identities are not individual, private matters, but social ones. Ultimately, the "amo del mundo" and the "tercer personaje" prove to be the "authors" of the collective "fictions" in which women cannot imagine themselves, choose the course of their lives, and openly be single mothers. The plays studied in these pages force us to recognize the hypocrisy of the rules of the game in which women, as cultured and reasoned as they may be, are not given full status as modern subjects.

As female writers of realist dramas performed in commercial theatres, and Storni a single mother to boot, the cards were stacked against these playwrights in their own time, and yet their plays were produced and seemingly well-received by the public, if not by critics and the ruling intelligentsia. Today, at close to a century beyond their time, and with readers and critics fully aware of the need to draw out the intimate ties among artistic, cultural, and socio-political change, there seems little reason to continue to condemn Spanish American female playwrights to the critical oblivion that they have endured for so long. Playwrights such as María Luisa Ocampo, Concepción Sada, and Alfonsina Storni participated in the debates and discourses of their times. They and their works might have been berated, misunderstood, or even censured, but they inevitably question and form part of the conflicts of Modernity. The dramatists and their characters seem to prove once and again Mary Louise Pratt's proposal that the freedom to construct one's self as a subject is not a given for women in Modernity, but rather a battle that must be won from within and a battle worth fighting for, no matter the odds.

Tecnológico de Monterrey

Notes

[1] There is more than one stumbling block involved in a case such as this. For one thing, Peña Doria's work has not circulated much outside of Mexico, making it difficult for scholars to consult it. Secondly, within Mexico there is still some resistance to the notion that realist and commercial theatre, regardless of whether it is written by men or women, is worthy of study. See Peña Doria's "La dramaturgia femenina mexicana, 1900-1940" for an excellent overview of playwrights active during the period. Some of her other publications include: *Digo yo como mujer. Catalina D'Erzell* (Mexico City: Ediciones La Rana, 2000) and *La dramaturgia femenina y el corrido mexicano teatralizado* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 2010).

[2] My understanding of Modernity in this essay is informed primarily by the ideas of Pratt and Salomone, in so far as I posit female dramatists' and their protagonists' freedom—or lack thereof—to construct themselves as subjects in Latin American societies that were transforming, or seeking to do so, in economic, political, and social terms in the early 20th century. In Mexico, specifically, from the end of the Revolution until the mid 20th century, intellectuals shared an idea of Modernity as a state the nation should strive for in order to place it on par with countries in the developed world. Beyond that vague common goal, the modern could be coded in a number of distinct guises, including industrialization and economic progress, technological advances, secularization, aesthetic experimentation, sexual liberation, subjectivity, and democracy, among others. Despite their potential interrelatedness, sorting out the multiple and often contradictory ideas about Modernity in Mexico entails a task beyond the scope of this article; see Biron (10 and subsequent) for a cogent discussion in this regard. However, it is with this larger discussion in mind that I seek to show that female playwrights of the commercial theatre during this period were among those who commented on and indeed manifested the modern and not only their better-known —male— counterparts, especially those who expressed their ideas in essays and novels.

[3] *Cosas de la vida* was written between April and May of 1923 and performed two months later in the Teatro Virginia Fábregas and again in 1926, in the same venue (Ortiz Bullé 7; Schmidhuber). It has not been reprinted since it was published in 1926 by the Talleres Gráficos de la Nación. I am grateful to Olga Martha Peña for providing me with a copy of her transcription. *El tercer personaje* was the first play to be produced in the 1936 season of the Autores Mexicanos in Bellas Artes; the premiere was on August 8 (Peña 36). Printed as Number 23 in the Colección Teatro Mexicano in 1950, Peña believes the play dates from 1934 (Peña 55 and correspondence with the author). *Dos mujeres*, clearly the more appropriate title, is Storni's; the other title was substituted on the recommendation of the play's producer in order to render it more attractive for the commercial theatre (Garzón 46). Storni's play premiered in March of 1927 and was published in Buenos Aires in the magazine *Bambalinas* on April 16 of the same year. Storni's life spanned from 1892 to 1938.

[4] Storni published these words in a piece that appeared under the pseudonym Tao Lao in the newspaper *La Nota* (Salomone 219).

[5] Judith Butler's ideas in many ways build on those of De Beauvoir's in the sense that the arbitrary nature of gender as a social construction is understood as a performance of gender. According to Butler, gender doesn't exist *a priori* but rather insofar as the subject acts. As such, by revealing the arbitrary nature of gender as a construct in *El amo del mundo* by means of the performances of her characters, Storni can be seen as a precursor to both seminal thinkers (See Garzón-Arrabal 82-83). For example, Márgara, the protagonist of Storni's play, explicitly refers to her role as a *spectator* of the interaction between men and women: "Me daré el lujo de ser el espectador desinteresado de lo que ocurre siempre entre una mujer hábil y un hombre tonto" (Storni 1178).

[6] Peña holds that Ocampo was in fact a member of both groups (33). See Schmidhuber's chapter on the Comedia Mexicana in *Dramaturgia mexicana* for a thorough discussion of the group's contribution to Mexican theatre, as well as a comprehensive review of the negative image traditionally held by critics.

For more on the perceived differences and similarities between experimental and national theatre groups of the time, see Ortiz, (45 and subsequent).

[7] The magazine *Mujer: Periódico independiente para la elevación moral e intelectual de la mujer*, published in Mexico between 1926 and 1929, serves as an excellent example. As Julia Tuñón has shown, the magazine encouraged women's participation in their intellectual and personal development yet civil responsibilities were understood as being subordinate to prescriptions about protection and modesty, and educating women was useful insofar as a means to ensure their effectiveness as mothers and educators of future citizens.

[8] As does Unruh, I follow here the notion of a larger cultural conversation proposed by Danny Anderson (15; Unruh 7).

[9] A similar conflict is evident in visual culture produced at the same time; see Hershfield.

[10] See Castellanos (107-8) for an interesting discussion of why Mexican women of the time were particularly attracted to a career in medicine.

[11] The character is represented by a voice offstage. Sada's description is as follows: "Fuerza indefinible, sobrehumana: Destino, Fatalidad. Providencia. Punto de apoyo fuera de nuestras vidas. Potencia contra la cual se estrellan nuestros vanos razonamientos, nuestra lógica soberbia" (Sada n.p.). The idea may have its origin in a brief reference from the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck's "Préface" to his *Théâtre complet* (1903): "Aujourd'hui, il y manque presque toujours ce troisième personnage, énigmatique, invisible mais partout présent, qu'on pourrait appeler le personnage sublime, qui, peut-être, n'est que l'idée inconsciente mais forte et convaincue que le poète se fait de l'univers et qui donne à l'œuvre une portée plus grande, je ne sais quoi qui continue d'y vivre après la mort du reste et permet d'y revenir sans jamais épuiser sa beauté " (*n.pag*.).

[12] See Jónasdottir,(33 and subsequent).

[13] The end of the play is ambiguous; Carlitos and Márgara's departure for Europe can be understood as an escape from a mediocre, suffocating environment as suggested by Storni, yet the fact remains that the two need to flee Buenos Aires to achieve a sense of wellbeing. Francine Masiello suggests this to be the "moment of truth" in which Storni cynically comments on the impossibility of liberating women from the cultural models that oppress them in modern culture and thus of the unsolvable conflict between the sexes (252). For her part, Salomone suggests that Márgara's departure and her son's recognition of her as his mother in the final scene mark "la persistencia de un resquicio por el que se cuela el deseo de luchar por un futuro distinto" (255-6).

[14] In response to the unwarranted attacks, Storni published two responses: one, "Aclaraciones," in *La Nación*, three days after the debut of the play on March 10, 1927, and the other, "Entretelones a un estreno," one month later in *Nosotros*. In her defense, Storni repeats the thesis of her problem play: "En mi comedia he querido, solamente, ir en contra de la mujer frívola, presentarla como suele ser, llena de pequeñas trampas, de minucias que la enlodan realmente, pero con un lodo menudo, disimulado, tolerado, que el hombre no advierte y que, si advierte, es casi un estímulo para sus sentidos. Como contraste le he opuesto una mujer de carácter y de responsabilidad, cualidades que, si la elevan como individuo moral, la restan como tipo específico de mujer en los conflictos del instinto" (qtd. in Galán and Gliemmo 276).

[15] The play's dedication to the well-known and popular actress of the time María Tereza Montoya, as well as the fact that she played Luisa in the first run of the play, encourages us to think that it was written for her (Unpublished manuscript and Peña 33-4).

[16] See Castellanos (111-12) for a lengthy —and scathing— deliberation on the relationship between manipulative Mexican mothers, absent fathers, and their spineless children.

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